

# Linda's Little Stranger

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"*Mmmph.*"

Jack passed the bedroom from the john, heard this sound for a few seconds, smiled to himself and moved on into the the living room.

"***Mmmmmph.*** *Shit!*"

Monster jumped up onto Jack's shoulder, digging his claws in. As Jack only wore a thin t-shirt and not the usual accompanying flannel shirt, the cat felt like some kind of bird of prey attempting to rend his flesh. Sighing, he sat quickly down on the sofa and leaned back. Monster got the hint, meowed, and traveled its length to jump upon the windowsill and stare outside at something that had caught his eye.

Linda came in shortly after in a loose shift dress. She was just beginning to show.

"I can't get into my goddamn jeans! Don't look at me like that, Piechowiak, you got me into this."

"Takes two to tangle, darlin'."

Linda gritted her teeth at the hokum. She plopped down on the sofa beside him, resting her bare heels on his right thigh.

"Rub my feet, wouldja?"

"Little early for that, isn't it? You've still got your figure -- you've only gained, what, a pound?"

"Practice for when I really need it."

"Well, I hope you're not plannin' on wearing high-heels everyday. You can't be a fashionista *and* a new mother at your --"

"Watch it."

"I mean, you ought to start taking it easy."

"I have three stories to work on just this week. Mitchell's arrest, that anti-vax chick, and the TWT interview."

Theresa W. Torres was the junior congresswoman from Miami who had been a pain in Pelosi's ass since she set foot in DC. She was second-generation Cuban-American and she thought she was God's gift to millennial America, full of 'fresh' ideas to shake up the government. Most saw the daughter of wealth as a spoiled socialite playing at politics, either to nab a rich husband or a six-figure paycheck from Nuevavision, the leading Latin-American cable network. A UF graduate in journalism, she had been the host of a popular Cuban-American news and entertainment program on an independent network. She also rocked the boat with positive reviews of Cuba's health system, earning the President's ire in a series of 'love it or leave it' social media statements.

"You know he is just *itching* to call her 'twat', " Linda said, swiping through her smartphone and showing him the latest digital missives.

"More like he's hot for her young *tail*," Jack drawled, flipping through an old issue of *National Geographic* while massaging Linda's toes with his free hand.

Linda made a barfing sound and pulled her feet away from her husband. Jack smiled after her as she headed into the kitchen and began making dinner.

#

Political gadfly, Dominic Mitchell, had been arrested for inciting violence in the case of a young neo-Nazi who had attacked a Houston synagogue with smoke bombs and pepper spray. The Texas Rangers had gone in as in-person undercover witnesses to his streamed speech at the Z-Ibid festival several weeks earlier. Linda had spoken with his ACLU lawyer, Pamela Weinstock, about his case. She didn't bother making issue with the woman's religious identity, as it had become a trope in legal circles. Weinstock was just another in a long line of ACLU acolytes who believed in freedom of speech no matter what. Mitchell, however, refused to speak directly to Miller.

Carrie James, on the other hand, was quite welcome to vent her spleen in Linda's ear, much to the latter's eye-rolling dismay. James, a former Playboy centerfold turned B-movie actress, had become a firebrand in the anti-vax movement. She sincerely believed that her youngest son, Jimmy, had become autistic because of the required set of vaccinations he received before entering pre-school.

"Never mind the fact that James was 45 and her husband 60 when Jimmy was born," Linda said as she mixed together ingredients for taco loaf, one of her specialties. "They seem to think that just because you have to take a blue pill to get it up somehow that's gonna lead to healthy productive children."

She filled a cast-iron loaf pan with the chunky cornbread batter and slid it into a hot oven. She then set about making fresh salsa, the aroma of ripe tomatoes, chilies, bell pepper, and onion wafting back into the living room.

"Need any help?" Jack asked automatically. She rarely did, and didn't now. After putting the bowl into the refrigerator, she sat back down next to him. Monster tentatively climbed back onto the sofa, nuzzling his mistress' thick red hair, which Linda had pinned up in a bun. Linda resumed searching social media for any news she'd missed in the past 25 minutes. She soon found a tasty item in her tip box that made her eyes light up.

#

Dick Jackson had been Governor of Rhode Island for 2/3 of his first term when he chose to come out as a gay man. He had done all the usual macho things for cover, like playing football and hockey in high school and college, even getting his face smashed in, leaving him with a permanent broken nose and scarred upper-lip. His rough exterior didn't bother voters and he handily won elections, first to the Newport city council, then as Democratic representative in the state house. His homeliness helped explain his lack of female companionship, and as the people were more concerned with economy and climate change, he was elected as Governor in no time.

Then came the Lighthouse disco massacre in his hometown of Newport, where thirty-five patrons and performers were gunned down by a religious extremist during an annual drag ball. One of his most fervent supporters, a queen named Lily Langtree, was one of the victims, and in his honor, Jackson made his big reveal. He also admitted that his frequent male companion, Professor Stan Feinberg, was his longtime boyfriend and current fiance'. Despite tough competition, lowlighted by a blatantly homophobic series of Republican attack ads, Jackson won the support of the people for a second term. Shortly after, the couple wed in a private ceremony.

Nearing the end of this term in office, the popular pol chose to throw his hat into the ring for the Democratic Presidential race. At first he seemed a shoo-in, with a spotless record, low unemployment, successful green initiatives, praise from elder statespersons, the works. Then came Zeke DeParedes' scathing editorial in *The Atlantic*, accusing him of being a sell-out. Jackson had cut funding for a Lighthouse Massacre memorial in order to support summer nutritional programs for needy children. DeParedes, a radical LGBTQ activist, was villified by most people and the online magazine quickly archived the article. Although Jackson found the main thesis false equivalence, he found personal remarks about his marriage uncalled for and demanded a public apology. DeParedes, who came from a wealthy Portuguese-American shipping family, tweeted a video of himself delivering a long, wet raspberry and a certain ethnic hand gesture aimed at Jackson's own Portuguese-American mother.

Other candidates used the gaffe to promote their own agendas and Jackson began to fade from the polls. By mid-June 2019, he again raised ire by declining invites to Pride 50 events, so as not to further alienate certain ethnic voters known for their homophobia. Still, liberal elites sent in large donations; gay was the new black after all. Beneath this were whispers of Jackson's marital woes. Feinberg was older; Jackson, at 46, was still buff and attractive to certain members of the gay male community. Men of a certain age felt him up in receiving lines when they could move past security. Younger jocks were more respectful in their flirting. Jackson had had few affairs before he fell in love with Stan, who had been his biology prof at university; they didn't begin seeing each other until after Dick had graduated with a degree in Business Law. The current climate was filled with temptations. For all his butch bravado, he was a dedicated bottom, hungry for more than an occasional poke from 57-year-old Stanley Feinberg.

Into this situation sauntered Ruby Thompson, an upper-class pimp who procured for elite clientele. Ruby, whose legit job was as a professional DJ, had his own woes, largely the teen rent-boy variety. A meeting was set up by he and one of Jackson's closest aides, resulting in a hot date for the Guv, you dig? Said incident took place in the guest bedroom of the aide's condo. Hours later, Jackson emerged refreshed, followed by two virile young black men, who had also been athletes, smirking as they zipped up their flies. Ruby was paid handsomely with some of that liberal elite slush fund, and here is where Linda Miller began her investigation.

#

"I just feel so weak!"

Jack sat on the sofa, his wounded leg up on the ottoman. Barry and Jud had brought him into the house from Jack's truck sling-style, his arms round both their shoulders, their arms hoisting his butt and legs. Linda rewarded them with cold beer and a nuked bag of popcorn. She brought her husband a can of energy drink somewhat pointedly. He accepted it, throwing her a look that meant 'I'll deal with you later.'

"Not *that* kind of weak." He drank some anyway.

"What could you do?" Jud, a lean, black ex-Marine, asked. "No open-carry in Cali."

"But if we were in *Florida*..." Barry intoned. He was a burly LPN of Nordic descent, and a Tampa native.

"I'd be at the morgue right now," Linda finished.

"Buzzkill," Jud said, after a pause.

"No, she's right," Jack said, "I left the service ten years ago and I haven't been keeping up with practice. I shoot with a camera now, remember?"

"Hey, don't look at me," Linda said to Jack's buds, "I have no problem having a gun in the house and a man who knows how to use it."

"Still getting death threats?" Barry asked.

Dominic Mitchell had been released on bail, paid by the founder of Gallant Men, an alt-right group. There had been the usual chest-beating, mostly online, with plenty of hate mail and nasty snark on her Twitter feed.

"Yeah," Jack said, gulping the rest of his drink. "One of those perks of free speech."

After dinner the night before, he had gone down to DQ's for a couple of sundaes because Linda had a craving for them. His suggestion of kool-wip and a can of crushed pineapple only resulted in stinkeye. He had just started walking back to his truck when he heard familiar pops and a sudden pain in his left calf that sent him sprawling. A woman screamed in a Mexican accent, "Keep away from my babies!!" before shots stilled her.

Jack lay face-down and played dead. He could feel the cold, squashed treats beneath his body. He had made it out of Iraq with barely a scratch, then *this*? His lower leg shrieked with pain -- the tibia was splintered and there was a dime-sized exit wound in his shin, oozing blood. Police cars pulled up in a few minutes that felt longer to Jack as he began to lose consciousness. Paramedics tended to him and several others caught in the line of fire. He called out for Linda on the ride to San Diego General before passing out.

She was there when he woke up, in a dimly-lit recovery ward, gauzy blue curtains separating the beds. His leg was propped up and bound in plaster.

"Oh, *Jack!*" she cried out softly, holding his hand. He smiled groggily and caressed her fingers with his thumb, then drifted off again. These drugs were *gooooood...*

#

Three dead, eight wounded, including the two young boys their mother gave her life to protect. A 22-year-old cashier and a 14-year-old boy at the window waiting for his order also died. The shooter was the boys' father, who had just gotten out of prison for beating up their mother a month before. Jack was one of

the first to be wounded, most of the targets being attractive men whom the killer saw as rivals in his toxically-macho eyes. The shooter was hustled into a waiting patrol car weeping like a woman.

#

"You sure you can handle him alone?" Jud said on the front porch. He held Barry by the waist.

"Yeah, yeah, you go," Barry said, then accepted the taller man's kiss. Jud hopped into an Uber and rode off.

Barry spent the next couple of days helping Jack to the can and attending to his medication. sleeping in the spare room down the hall. Jack and Jud had been friends in Basic; Jud and Barry had been a couple for a few years, longer than Jack and Linda, though their first meet was not as cute.

"Let me get this straight: Jud was your *carjacker*?!" Linda said incredulously.

"Guilty," Barry said, "He was, well, a hot thief. Yes, I am shameless but I fell for the guy in the courtroom. His remorse was genuine. No priors, just a spur-of-the-moment thing. After he did his time, I was there waiting for him. I encouraged him to join the Marines, to further clean up his act."

"*Dude... he brutalized you*," Linda said, with something like awe.

"The heart wants what the heart wants," Barry, who had suffered bruising and a twisted ankle as Jud yanked him out of his car at a stoplight, sighed. He had been driving home from graveyard shift at a Tampa nursing home at the time, tired and not at full strength.

"Oh god, please don't quote Woody Allen!"

"I wasn't; other people have used that phrase. Anyway, we started seeing each other casually when he was in town, and then it got more... personal. I love him, he loves me, and that's all that matters now."

They were sitting on the front porch, sipping beer and watching the new moon rise over San Diego's hills. Inside, Jack snored softly on the sofa, his propped-up sore leg improving. Monster lay curled up beside him.

#

"Baby, why you obsessin' on that Jew bitch fo'?"

Louie Dunn leaned over Dom's shoulder as he attacked the keypad under one of his online avatars, Dikemilk105. He was mocking the shooting of Jack Piechowiak on WKF -- White Knights Forum -- by questioning his masculinity, even though he personally found the man attractive.

"*Back off, woman! I'm busy...*"

Mitchell had tired of supporting Dunn's delusions and had reverted to biologically-accurate pronouns since he'd left prison. It had been liberating to fuck a real man again, to reach around and tug on *something*, albeit a limp one. He had been gifted by a sympathetic guard with an Antifa protestor who was too weak to say 'no'. They youth never saw his rapist, his face forcibly occupied at the time in the dimly-lit shower room by a tattooed biker.

"Nuthin' better 'n rotisserie in the mornin'," he cackled over the weeping college boy. Said youth wound up being Epsteined shortly after Mitchell made bail, so the incident remained quiet for the time being.

Taking the hint, Dunn packed his bags and left Mitchell's mansion outside of Austin, returning to Houston where he had had a job as a bouncer in a lesbian bar, or so he thought. Life with Dom had made him a pariah in the LGBTQ community. His Republican parents grudgingly accepted him when he came out as queer, but openly disowned him when he became trans.

"I *got* three sons," said his father, "I don't need another, not one of those *freaks* 'specially!"

Business had declined at Dunn Auto and Body, known for their 'Get 'er Dunn' online and AM radio ads. A meme started going around -- 'Get *It* Dunn' -- with Louie's face supplanting his dad's in the print copy, which made the family a laughing-stock in the Texas black business community.

Louie ultimately found safe harbor with a spinster aunt who was equally alienated -- she supported Bernie in '16 and remained a fan to this very day. Louie kept his father-sourced anti-semitism to himself for the duration.

"*Mm-mm-mm!*" Ruth Dunn shook her head as they watched the UBC Evening News. The president was posing with the two little Perez boys whose mother had died for them. Enrique Perez had been wearing a Keep America Great cap when he killed his wife and two innocent bystanders. The retired schoolteacher looked at her former niece.

"You're a part of this you know, Lou."

"I--" Louis began, then stopped abruptly. He rubbed his eyes and sat back in his chair. "I was *misled*," he whispered.

#

Adversity in her home life only made Linda more vigilant with the Jackson scandal. After numerous e-mails and phone calls, she felt confident enough in her assertions to submit the article to her editor.

"*Jesus*, Linda, this could ruin this man's whole *life*," Susan Futterman said, cautiously.

"People believe enough in this guy to donate to his campaign, only for him to use it to get laid? He's the Gary Hart of our generation!"

Susan sighed. "Okay, it's your funeral. Prepare for backlash from the gay community. He's a rock star to them."

Yeah, and Stephen King adored Hart so much he made him *President* in one of his dumb books. Hero takes a fall when his crimes see the light of day, Sue."

"You've been listening to 80's-retro radio again, I see."

"Wouldn't be here without it," Linda drawled.

"*'I Was Conceived At Live-Aid'*. Yes, I've heard that one before, Lin'."

"*After* the show, to be more accurate. My folks weren't *that* horny."

The article was posted that afternoon and by that evening, Linda's Twit feed was full of vitriol. Jackson was in full denial mode and his lawyers were demanding a retraction from Lucretia's publisher, Wankel Media.

Meanwhile, in the Jackson household:

"You have *humiliated* me!!" Stan shouted loud enough for the paparazzi to hear in the street. "I am *leaving* you, Richard," he continued, shoving clothes into his suitcase. "I cannot bear the *sight* of you!"

As Stanley drove off, he left a trail of flashbulbs behind him.

Dick was crying, then crying mad by this point. He called his lawyers to vent, then a private investigator he'd used before.

"What can you get on her? I want *whatever* you can dig up."

#



Linda holed up in the house, praying for a new blip in the news cycle -- another hooker coming forward to blab about the president's past sex life, another member of the administration resigning to 'spend more time with his family' -- to take some of the heat off of her. Jackson had suspended his campaign as poll numbers tanked.

Jack was improving; Barry had returned to the flat he shared with Jud. Linda needed the spontaneous intimacy only her husband could provide, especially now.

Barry sat at his apartment laptop, taking it all in. The camera he had set up in the couple's living room to keep an eye on Jack when he was taking a break was still located atop a bookcase. Amidst the hate mail and nasty phone calls, it had become forgotten by the couple. He smirked at their romantic fumbling; he had hit Record moments earlier. A new source of income had arrived that morning from Merlin Investigations LTD and he was taking full advantage of it, for his history with Linda Miller went back several years...

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